

A sociologist's adventures in social media land

by Blog Admin

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Deborah Lupton was pleasantly surprised when her first step into online academic discussions was met with over 2,000 readers and many instructive comments. Here, she shows how online adventures can yield productive and creative results through easy engagements with academics online.



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Like many academics, I was quite oblivious to the virtues of using digital social media for professional purposes for rather a long time. Although I used Facebook for private reasons to keep in touch with family and friends, and had signed up to Academia.edu and LinkedIn to connect with other academics, for several years these were the only social media platforms I used.

Then one day earlier this year the scales fell from my eyes. I wrote a piece for an online news and discussion site, The Conversation. This site was designed for academics to write accessible articles directed at the general public, who in turn are invited to comment. After only a few hours following publication of the article, more than 500 people had read it, and several had commented. A couple of days later the post had accumulated over 2,000 views and many more comments. I was amazed by the way such a forum offered instant feedback on my ideas and a large readership. This was such a different model of publishing from the one I was used to: academic journal articles and books, which took many months and often years to appear in print following completion of a manuscript and even longer for responses to appear.

I soon decided to set up my own blog so that I could engage in such public engagement under my own terms: yes, gentle reader, the very blog that you are reading here. I then joined Twitter, a micro-blogging social platform that I had previously thought only as a forum for celebrities to post inanities and politicians to spread propaganda (my Twitter handle is @DALupton).

Again, I was surprised at what I found. I initially had set up a Twitter account as a way to publicise my blog posts but I then found that it was a really useful way to engage with academics and others working in or interested in the same topics I was. I found that people shared links to interesting blog posts, news articles, journal articles and books. They chatted about their latest research or debated a contentious issue, and I readily joined in. Using Tweetreach, a tool to document how far one's tweets were travelling, I found that some days I was reaching up to 80,000 Twitter accounts. This is thanks to the exponential nature of the practice of retweeting, where one's followers retweet one's tweet to their followers, and so on. The power of online social networks was obvious.

I then decided that I needed a way of preserving, curating and sharing all the interesting blog posts and news articles that I had discovered via Twitter. I signed up to Delicious, a digital bookmarking site, to achieve this (my collections are [here](#)). I then discovered Pinterest, a curating platform for images, and found that it provided a fascinating way to collect images relevant to my research and share these with others: see my boards [here](#). I set up an account with Storify to make 'social stories' using material drawn from the web (they can be viewed [here](#)), and shared my PowerPoint presentations on ShareSlide ([here](#)). I used Paper.li to start up a weekly newsletter, [Health & Society](#), to publish some of the great information I was discovering online about one of my major research interests. I experimented with Pearltrees to curate and bookmark websites (see these [here](#)). Using an online wizard I even made my own app providing key concepts on medical sociology (see it [here](#)). And of course I used Twitter to let other people know about these initiatives.

After using all these platforms and investigating what they could offer as part of my professional practice, I wrote a post for my blog on how sociologists can use Pinterest, another for the online forum Crikey on making an app for academic purposes, and a further three-part series for my blog on the topic of digital

sociology.

[Digital Sociology: An Introduction](#) gathers together these articles in one place as a resource for others who might be interested in using social media in their practice as an academic, as well as for those who might be interested in what the term 'digital sociology' might encompass. I have also added some additional material on using Storify, Pearltrees and infographics tools.

Does using these social media tools take time out from other academic work? Yes, of course. But I would contend that it is well worth the time and effort. You can use these tools as little or as much as you want, depending on what you find you gain from them. And judicious use of these tools both contributes to and enriches your research and teaching efforts and attracts more readers to your other more 'traditional' academic research outputs. These are surely major goals for any academic.

These are the three main reasons I use social media as part of my academic professional practice:

- Research: to let others know about mine, to learn about that of others and to gather material to support my research.
- Creativity: using social media can be a great way to create items to share with others quickly and easily and often in a pleasing visual form.
- Engagement: social media offer an accessible way to engage with other academics and non-academics.

Note: This article gives the views of the author(s), and not the position of the Impact of Social Sciences blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

Deborah's Digital Sociology: An Introduction can be accessed [here](#). This is blog was originally published on her 'This Sociological Life' blog, and is reprinted here with permission.

About the author:

Deborah Lupton is a sociologist in the Department of Sociology and Social Policy, University of Sydney. She is the author of 12 books and many research articles and chapters on topics including medicine and public health, the body, risk, parenting culture, childhood, the emotions, obesity politics, and digital cultures

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